Jericho Ridge Community Church
Forum #2 WIML Discussions

Excerpt from *Interculturalism: A Preferred Praxis of Ministry in Multicultural Contexts*
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EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH

Inherent in the Church's intercultural quest to create a "spirituality of we" is the reality that the evangel will not only have to cross ethnocultural lines but will also traverse alternative worldviews, faiths, philosophies, religious practices and resultant beliefs and attendant values, all within postmodernism's disdain for the unique and particular claims of Jesus Christ and those who follow him. In short, how can Killarney Park and any other church believing in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's means of salvation survive in this society let alone adopt the praxis of intentional interculturalism within its own walls?

To assist us in the matter I turned to respected anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert who most accurately describes in his description of critical realism the spirit of the folk at Killarney. In his book, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* (1999), Hiebert addresses how mission can be done in an anticolonial, postmodern era characterized by religious relativism in pluralist societies. Hiebert focuses on three epistemological foundations that lie under our concerns: positivism, instrumentalism/idealism and Hiebert's choice, critical realism.

Positivism

Positivism is that philosophy first introduced by Frenchman August Comte (1798-1857) who asserted humanity was in the process of evolution, having left behind a Theological stage marked by fetishism, polytheism and monotheism; a Metaphysical stage characterized by humanity's esprit de corps in its new found independence from human authority – an age of reason and logic, to emerge in a "Positive Stage" where, combined with scientific inquiry, it sought to objectify all knowledge based on empirical evidence supplied by the material realm.

A positivist epistemology is preoccupied with cause and event. It focuses on questions of "how" and ignores teleological or purposive aspects of "why" things happen. We still feel four lingering effects of positivism today. Positivism makes a sharp distinction between facts on the one hand and feelings and values on the other; it is said to be impartial with regard to reality. Secondly, positivism located the power to objectify in the individual rather than the community. Thirdly, it vaunted itself as the true knowledge placing into jeopardy all other knowledge systems and last, positivism strained toward an acultural and ahistorical system of knowledge.[1]

Positivism promoted the scientific community's quest for a Grand Unifying Theory that until the early 1960s was the backbone of what we have come to understand as the age of modernity or as some like David Bosch and Juergen Habermas call it, the modernity project. The age of modernity can be assessed as a massive and extraordinary effort by the world's intelligentsia to develop the unbiased, unharnessed power of science, universal morality (unhinged from theological mooring) and law to comply with the inner logic of a grand unifying theory. Modernity was going to make sense of reality and it had to make sense of it in this way!

Positivism had, and still has, a powerful effect on the Church, on ministry and mission. Like everything else that it touched, positivism informed the church that it could objectify missions by treating it as a scientific specialty. This led to the Church doing missions rather than it being God's mission. It compelled Christian leaders to teach and train others that reality could be divided into two convenient and relatively unconnected categories of the natural and supernatural realms. The Church was relegated to the increasingly inferior and neglected realm of the supernatural of which it became a chaplain, focused on the soul often to the neglect of the physical. Because positivism located authority in the individual, it displaced the Christian community as the informing voice in believers' spiritual development.

Particularly damaging in relation to the concern of this research project was positivism's stress on cultural uniformity. Any other culture than the one brought on by modernity was discounted as primitive and backward. Yesterday's missionaries are often accused of seeking to civilize the world's indigenous peoples by crushing their language, culture and tradition. Barbara Kingsolver's fictitious protagonist Baptist missionary Nathan Price in her novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), depicts in excruciating detail the power of positivism on Christian mission. As Hiebert says, "Missionaries believed themselves to be participating in a worldwide crusade of human advancement. They built schools and hospitals alongside churches and taught science as an essential part of the curriculum along with the gospel. In many parts of the world, Christianity became equated with Western civilization and commerce, and the reshaping of the entire world in the image of modernity was seen as a foregone conclusion."[2]

The Church so closely associated itself with modernity that it allowed positivism to affect its view of other religions in a profoundly negative manner. Other religions were associated with alternate worldviews and "developing world" cultures. The uniqueness of Christ and the gospel diminished and rejected all other religions as false.

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[1] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* pp. 7-9.
[2] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* p. 25.

Instrumentalism and Idealism

Comte's positivism has lasted well into the technological revolution but decades ago it had already begun to unravel. Positivism simply couldn't reconcile how, with all the power available to it, it could not deliver the utopia it had promised. Neither could positivism bring increasingly powerful and independent fields of knowledge into a comprehensive unifying theory. As David Bosch commented, "The West's grand schemes, at home and in the Third World, have virtually all failed dismally. The dream of a unified world in which all would enjoy peace, liberty, and justice has turned into a nightmare of conflict, bondage, and injustice. The disappointment is so fundamental and pervasive that it cannot possibly be ignored or suppressed."[3]

The rapid disintegration of modernity evoked a fork in the road for the world's thinkers. Some chose to revert to idealism and others pressed forward into a subjective instrumentalism that lies under our current postmodern age. Instrumentalism welcomes a more relaxed need for coherence in knowledge systems. Unlike positivists, subjective instrumentalists do not worry when paradigms of knowledge clash and conflict because they are not attempting to claim any particular system as the truth.

With suspended judgment, instrumentalists can juggle diametrically opposed theories about reality without pressing them together in a philosophical vice. Instrumentalism is content to offer partial knowledge: "There is no need to know everything in order to understand a part of our human experience."[4] "Consequently, scientific theories are neither true, nor probable, nor progressive, nor highly confirmed. Nor is there progress in scientific thought. In the end, instrumentalism abandons all claims to truth. If we cannot judge between belief systems, all we have left is phenomenology – our attempts to describe and understand reality from our own perspective."[5]

The truth is up for grabs with instrumentalists; the whole universe has become bathed in relativity. In fact, instrumentalism denies that humanity can know truth; we can only approach it in fits and starts. For those who reverted down the fork of idealism, objective truth is likewise difficult to attain. The idealist rejects the idea that the power to know objective truth is located in the individual. Idealists return the idea of truth back into the hands of the community where it becomes a "hermeneutical truth".[6] Hermeneutical truth is arrived at through a Hegelian type of dialogue that seeks synthesis of opposing viewpoints.

The subjective nature of knowing, common to instrumentalists and idealists, has facilitated the development of postmodernism. There are positive postmodernists who insist that *all* knowing is contextual and particular. There are negative postmodernists whose deconstructionist tendencies fixate on motifs like the abuse of power and the withholding of justice that push us toward unending and paralyzing self-critique.

Both idealism and instrumentalism do away with objective truth. Truth then is relative and can only be approximated by communities. How has this affected the Church? We no longer have a theology. We have an assortment of theologies with competing conditions and conflicting presuppositions that have fragmented the Christian community theologically.

Idealists bring a neo-conservative fundamentalism to the tasks of evangelism and mission. The gospel is unaffected and remains pure and simple in its claims. As a result, the identifiable other remains an identifiable other despite possible conversion. The exertion of idealist principles in evangelism and cross-cultural mission that rejects dialogue projects a certain arrogance that is met by a new fundamentalism within Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, have virtually slashed the sails of Christian witness. Relativism commands that the gospel is one truth claim among many competing truth claims and has no authority to charge or judge any other as limited or partial. The most missionaries could do who were affected by instrumentalism was share and converse. Salvation became equated with justice and liberation from oppression. Dignity and wholeness took on new value as the Church sought to address social ills.

Instrumentalism has caused Christians to view people of other religions with a new compassion. Other religionists are Christians' intellectual and spiritual equals. All paths lead to a common salvation. The Christian claim of exclusive salvation in Christ alone is silenced. Hiebert observes that with instrumentalism, "To find common grounds for discussions, we must move away from a Christocentric theology to a theocentric theology."[7]

Critical Realism

In critical realism, knowledge is both objective and subjective. "Like instrumentalism, critical realism distinguishes between reality and our knowledge of it; but like positivism, it claims that knowledge can be true. Critical realism also assumes, ontologically, that the world is orderly and that that order can be comprehended, in some measure, by human reason"[8] acquired through cognitive/experiential maps and models. Critical realism is testimonial and irenic in nature. It sees knowledge in cultural and historical processes and contexts. Critical realism is descriptive of Killarney's confessional community.

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[3] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission,* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 361.

[4] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* p. 43.

[5] Ibid, p. 44.

[6] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* p. 48.

[7] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* p. 63.

[8] Ibid, p. 71.

Critical realism has a concern for person and message. Like instrumentalism, critical realism believes in the hermeneutical discernment of community. It does not claim pure objectivity for human knowledge but understands objective truth is subjectively known and appropriated in human lives. "In critical realism we take the ideas, feelings, values, and purposes of people to be real, and seek to understand them as human beings as they reveal themselves to us."[9] A critical realism approach brings credibility and intellectual coherence to Killarney's attempted interculturalism.

How then does critical realism affect the Church and its mission? First, "evangelical critical realists differentiate between theology and scripture and ascribe final and full authority to the scripture as the inspired, divinely superintended record of God acting in and entering human history. ... Theology, on the other hand, is our best human understanding of the Scriptures."[10] Theology is that which we confess through faith. It is not simply a cognitive affirmation, nor an intellectual assent, nor mere positive feelings, but passion and knowledge blended in discipleship. This is descriptive of Killarney's praxis.

Critical realism allows us to see that we know in part, but it also allows us to know what is necessary (1 Cor 13). It accepts there are thousands of hermeneutical communities striving to know the objective truth of God-in-Christ and Spirit subjectively appropriated in each of their contexts. Critical realism accepts the theological diversity inherent in the Church. Through global communication with Christian brothers and sisters we can ascertain how to strengthen weaknesses caused by contextual particularity by making hermeneutical gatherings such as Killarney's participation in events like national Study Conferences, Mennonite Central Committee forums, and participation in the Mennonite World Conference more important than ever. As Hiebert points out, the apostle Paul accepted contextual diversity as it pertained to theological stresses as long as those punctuations never interfered with the centrality of preaching a crucified and risen Christ.

Evangelical critical realists live out their faith in community. At Killarney we respect people of other beliefs as thinking adults and exhibit respect for their convictions. We're not interested in winning an argument but in winning the lost to Christ. We take conversion seriously as both point and process. Justification and sanctification are inseparable elements of the same transformation. In historic Anabaptist tradition we believe salvation and ethics hang together. This is congruent with a critical realism epistemology.

In 1992 I participated with others in visiting fifty churches and Christian ministry and mission agencies in a three-week period. Part of the cultural immersion program based out of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno was a contact we made with the pastor of a Beverly Hills church who I distinctly remember saying, "Our experience has taught us that our first quest is to resocialize people, because once they are *inside* the community their questions change." Killarney operates on the conviction that people first and foremost need to find a primary place of belonging and meaning, and in so doing re-socialize them in the ways of transformed behaviour and beliefs.

Alan Kreider's, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom,* effectively chronicles the development (in some sense the reduction) of conversion from the Church's inception to the era of King Clovis of the Franks in the sixth century. Kreider's research strongly suggests that the process of conversion is most complete when those discipling new believers and God-seekers address all three components of belief, behaviour and belonging. Kreider's analysis also indicates that when one of these three wanes or is overemphasized at the expense of the other two, the result is a stunting of missiological effectiveness.[11]

The relationship between belief, behaviour and a felt sense of belonging, if it is to have meaning over the entire course of one's lifetime, will require it to be expressed in organic and mutually interdependent, not mechanical means. The conversion of people through community does not necessarily follow the linear thinking of an older positivism-informed modernist cognitive approach. It used to be widely accepted that a change in belief was a necessary prerequisite to a conversion of behaviour that in turn promoted a felt need to alter one's allegiance and belonging. In contrast, those who come to know Killarney as their spiritual home often experience a felt sense of belonging that provides motivation for them to change their behaviour that in turn allows for a personal decision to follow Jesus.

Christian Critical Realism and Alternative Belief Systems

As has been mentioned, positivist-informed approaches to evangelism and mission compel Christians to "reject other religions as totally false, and with them the beliefs and customs associated with them. Conversion requires a total rejection of old ways. The result is a combative approach to other religions."[12] There is some residual attachment to this view among some of the older members at Killarney. That is no surprise, for positivism dominated Christian missions during our elder-folk's years of spiritual formation.

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[9] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, p. 75.

[10] Ibid, p. 98.

[11] Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom,* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). Kreider invests considerable effort in unearthing an authentic and full-orbed conversion experience that today's church so desperately requires.

[12] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts,* p. 114.

More recently, instrumentalism-informed Christians at Killarney have had a tendency to see all religions as culture bound and as serving useful functions in their respective societies. Although there are not many, those affected by such views tend to be particularly from the boomer generation most severely pinched by the transitions brought about by postmodernism. In a setting like Killarney, people with instrumentalist convictions remain in the closet. They are hesitant to criticize and judge others, which can be good, but are equally hesitant to openly uphold the uniqueness of Christ even though that is what they internally believe. Generally, among those inflicted with an instrumental epistemology there is confusion as to how to interact with the religiously "identifiable other."

The majority of church members, however, would walk the path of critical realism. This means there is strong corporate affirmation to identify our common humanity with others. That means we recognize each person as an image-bearer who lives in God's creation; who has been given by God a mind, a heart, senses and the intuition to know God and his power to save. We are not naive as to how difficult this can be, particularly across language barriers, but we are not daunted by the need to create friendships across cultural and religious lines.

Conversation and friendship allow us to begin to know the other person's spiritual convictions and moral codes, values and beliefs. In so doing, we do not compromise our ultimate allegiance to the Kingdom and King. We do not share in other people's spirituality, nor do we compromise our conviction that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and that all other gods are false gods.

Even as we affirm the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of biblical scripture we do so without arrogance. We know we are not superior in any way to other people. But we are forgiven and strive to live with the joy and humility offered forgiven people. In love and compassion we extend ourselves without, hopefully, patronizing others, to help them find salvation and freedom from the power of sin.

A critical realist epistemology has allowed us at Killarney to observe and identify some important aspects in relating to identifiable others.

First, for many of the world's peoples, religion and culture are one and the same. It is a difficult task for us to disentangle what has been for our newcomers, inextricably woven together. And why would we even try? We do so, because understanding the culture of the other will often lead to understanding the nature of their faith and the shape of their beliefs. The task at hand for us at Killarney is to always provide an intellectual and emotional matrix of truths and a life in Jesus that demonstrates those self-evident basic beliefs rather than pit isolated religious doctrines against one another. Our experience at befriending new internationals informs us that they have a stronger emotional and intellectual attachment to their culture-of-origin than any spiritual convictions. That leads us to conclude religious beliefs for them may not be bridges of truth as much as their cultures-of-origin are.

Secondly, Killarney's praxis of intentional interculturalism based on critical realism proposed in this paper can hold to a divine particularity in Jesus without compromising biblical and ethical integrity and without the relational condescension often associated with other dispositions.

Thirdly, intentional interculturalism is a highly relational exercise. There is always a tendency by some Christians to subjugate and objectify the person and work of Jesus Christ into an idea, a mental construct, that one either rejects, appropriates or otherwise categorizes. Praxis of interculturalism, however, is developing a way of life based upon God's story that relates to people who are themselves in relationship with other conceptions of reality and God or gods. Jesus did not offer philosophical, rationalistic treatises as to how to relate to alien religions. He intentionally met with them, face to face. Blind determination to categorize human beings apart from relational connectivity and face to face interaction is always problematic. A Christian expression of interculturalism is primarily a means of human interaction out of which can flow clarity regarding matters of faith and belief. Through praxis of interculturalism, Christians can learn to acknowledge, appreciate and affirm the other in the midst of their faith and beliefs while holding firmly to their identity in Christ alone.

Fourthly, critical realism assists us at Killarney to focus on Jesus with a new appreciation of how he related to human beings distinctly different from himself. How did he comprehend righteousness? Where did he locate sin and how did he understand sin's relationship to unbelief? Jesus demonstrated he was just as or perhaps more concerned with people's faith (ability to believe), and belief (their mental image of God) than he was about external allegiances to established religion and the power it wielded. Focusing on Jesus assists us in answering the questions we need to ask although it might not provide answers to questions frequently asked that are ultimately not our concern and not the focus of this paper.

Killarney's epistemology of critical realism affects how we view not only persons from other cultures but the cultures themselves and to that we now turn.